

READING GROUP GUIDE

THE NIGHT BIRDS

1. *The Night Birds* centers on the Senger family, who live across the river from a small band of Dakota. Famous leaders such as Little Crow or Colonel Sibley do not appear as characters. Does the novel gain by focusing on ordinary individuals rather than people most often written about in history books?

2. The novel alternates between two time periods, 1876 and 1862. Why did the author choose a dual narrative structure? Do the alternating stories echo each other in unexpected ways?

3. "I was born in the shadow of the Great Sioux War," Asa tell us in the first line of the story. Is the first person voice compelling? When Hazel begins her narrative of the family's journey from Missouri the writing switches to the third person. What effect did this change have on you?

4. On page 23, Hazel tells a story about children gathered in a castle where the king has forbidden speech. Why does she tell this story in response to Cassie's question? Does the theme of silence resonate throughout the novel?

5. In a summer of war, Hazel survives by attempting to shed her German-American identity, seeking to become Dakota. Is she successful? How did you respond to her character as a young woman and the choices she makes? When she returns, how has she changed?

6. How does place impact the people in *The Night Birds*? Did the narrative transport you into the past?

7. Discuss the title of the novel. What are the night birds? Why are they a motif?

8. "The mystic fatalism that suffuses *The Night Birds* comes from both sides of a cultural frontier and it is often beautifully expressed," Madison Smartt Bell wrote in a *Boston Globe* review. Do you agree? How do German and Dakota folklore traditions inform the characters' lives? What are the spiritual dimensions of this story?

9. The Dakota Conflict, once known as The Sioux Uprising, is considered a lost or forgotten episode in national history. Why do you think this event is not widely known today? How does the novel illuminate history? Did the author achieve balance in his portrayal of German and Dakota relations?

10. Did you find the ending satisfying? Why or why not? What scenes or images will linger in your imagination?